Re-reading "continuity and change"

Scheuch, Erwin K.

Re-reading »Continuity and Change«

Erwin K. Scheuch*

On the eve of the »cultural revolution« that is associated with the year 1968, nine authors submitted their chapters on Germany to Henry Kissinger. He had organized meetings at Harvard, the final outcome of which would be an anthology on the Federal Republic. At the time of the meetings, Henry Kissinger had been a quiet colleague within the Institute for International Affairs, living down a controversial reputation as an adviser to the late John F. Kennedy. He had been a proponent of the notion of a limited nuclear war, and this was at that time and for a long time to come not popular in intellectual circles. But Henry Kissinger was on his way back as part of the entourage of the then presidential-hopeful Rockefeller. As the manuscripts were acquiring a thin coat of dust, Henry Kissinger advanced to the position of a special adviser on foreign policy and defense to Richard Nixon—the first step on his way to historical fame as the »Metternich« of the United States, and the architect of the Camp Davies agreements.

The anthology was never published. It would have indeed been inopportune if not outright embarassing had Henry Kissinger's name been associated with some of the views in the anthology. The public might have taken the editorship of a now active politician as a stamp of approval for all that the two covers of the book were to include. Thus, Alfred Grosser in his chapter »The Paradox of Foreign Policy« credited Marxism with facilitating Western Germany's European identification. Karl Kaiser in »Germany at the Crossroads - Problems of a Policy on Reunification« advocated a stance that was later the core of Willy Brandt's »Neue Ostpolitik«. Understandably as it may have been, the burial of the manuscripts by tacit neglect was nevertheless a pity. I still consider Klaus Epstein's »The Cultural Situation«, using the broad understanding of Culture that we associate with the term »Kulturleben«, the best treatment of the topic--and one in which the political significance of developments there was characterized. And Wolfgang F. Stolper's and Karl W. Roskamp's analysis of economic policy in post-war Western Germany convincingly demonstrated the gap between a coherent theory on Sundays and a pragmatic practice during workdays.

* Adress all communications to: Prof. Dr. Erwin K. Scheuch, University of Cologne, Institute for Applied Social Research. Greinstr. 2, D-5000 Köln 41, W.-Germany

The collection did have its effects as a set of mimeographed papers passed on within networks of cogniscenti as a sort of American Samisdat. This was relevant for my biography, as the chapter on the social structure of the Federal Republic gained me an invitation to the Center for Advanced Studies at Princeton in 1972/73. And here and there footnotes acknowledged the effect of one or the other of the chapters. But it should also be understandable that this author felt disinclined to disturb the dust on his copy of his essay. The chapter had been written under considerable time pressure, and perhaps one might not like what one saw later.

Until the year 1988--more than 20 years after completion in 1967—when young colleagues discovered the copy of the unpublished Kissinger-anthology and found the chapter on Germany worthy of resurrection. And that necessitated my rereading the manuscript.

Would 1 write the chapter differently today? Of course, as the country obviously has changed—though according to the text of 1967 not much as is frequently assumed. I still would characterize the stratification system as I did then, although the everyday rituals associated with it have paled. However, I would not give stratification as such as central a place in characterizing German social structure as I did then. Vertical differentiation is not as important anymore relative to other forms of social differentiation-such as life styles.

A number of descriptive details about the German leadership groups have aged but I would still give as central a place to the analysis of the elites as I did in 1967—in a text that was adressed more to political scientists than to sociologists. Above all, I consider the structural interpretation of the German elite—highly segmented, with relatively long career lines and diffuse recruitment »pools«—as appropriate as 1 did then.

Still, there has been a major change in and for those leadership groups that are crucial for public affairs. Political parties today are innundated with teachers as functionaries. In general, elites with a background in liberal arts, and an occupation in cultural areas (teachers, journalists, academic personnel, lesser artists) have largely replaced personnel recruited from the fields of jurisprudence or economics or the natural sciences. Today, neither the CDU nor the SPD have front-rank functionaries that are competent in economic questions!

CP. Snow's thesis of the enmity of the two cultures—the culture of utility and that of high culture—describes the Federal Republic much better now than it did twenty years ago. The mass media have given skills in communication a greater edge in competition for leadership positions, and have in general increased the importance of the cultural sectors—now Culture as »Kulturleben«. About 15 years ago Samuel Huntington (in *The Crisis of Democracy)* asked himself if democracy was a viable form of government with the omnipresence of media. This question can now be

properly asked with reference to the Federal Republic as well. Western Germany is an extremely nervous society today with a widening gap between the private worlds and the images about conditions at large. What makes this more pertinent, the FRG has a particularly nervous leadership, not just in public affairs but in general. Given that proclivity, I would write again that the international orientation of its leadership groups is still the best guarantee for stability of the West German polity. Therefore I view an orientation such as that of Egon Bahr (SPD) or Bernhard Friedmann (CDU), searching for some sort of equidistance of a »German« Germany from the USA and the USSR, as extremely discomforting. Even as a sociologist—and the discipline tends towards structural determinism in explaining political processes--I would see elites as decisive for the state and the development of the country.

Perhaps the major change in characterizing the country as it appears today would be a much greater emphasis on corporatistic modes of social organization and of problem solving. The post-war heigth in orientation towards the USA as an example passed sometime in the first half of the seventies, and consequently aspects of German society that set it apart from its neighbours reassert themselves. Corporatism is probably the most significant of these *differentia specified.*

In my theoretical approach I see no need for a major change. In 1967 I argued against structural explanations of National Socialism and its aftermath. Rather, societal conditions were presented as a necessary but by no means sufficient explanation in public life. I feel even stronger now as then that structural determinism in explaining events of history is obscurantism in the guise of social science.

This fits well with a second feature of the theoretical approach. While I subscribed to a systems paradigm (in a very general way) I could not see a society as the German one as tightly integrated. At that time I used the label »indifference of system elements«, being unaware the ethnologists working in South East Asia had just coined this notion »loose coupling« or »loose systems« (Embree). This looseness of the German social structure, its coincidence of pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial features, facilitates what I identified as an integrating element in a--to use the new term—loose system: the criss-crossing of cleavage lines.

Yes, the Federal Republic has changed, for ordinary people in everyday life it is more Western European than before. But for all the family-likeness between Western countries, parts of German society are still very German, perhaps more so then 20 years ago. The social movements are probably the most significant aspect. With respect to this the author confesses total ignorance, a lack of foresight. But perhaps that is an aspect of German society; limited predictability in politics—the »incertitudes allemandes«.